

Faith Mennonite Church
March 23, 2008 ~ Easter

“With fear and great joy”

Acts 10:34-43; Matthew 28:1-10; 16-17

Five years ago a friend of mine lost her husband, at age 51, to a brief battle with an aggressive cancer. Her husband was a pastor and she was a woman of deep faith. They both believed in the resurrection and didn't fear his death. Yet she wasn't ready to let him go. They had anticipated many more years together. As she sat in vigil at his deathbed, one of their close friends, whose own wife had died just a year earlier, assured her with these words: “Resurrection is also for the living.”

In the following days, months, and years, she experienced the mix of fear and joy, awe and doubt that we find among Jesus' followers in Matthew's account of the resurrection of Jesus. It didn't seem to matter that Jesus had tried to speak of his death. His community was not ready for the tragedy. And after three days, still in deep shock and sorrow, they were understandably incredulous when first an angel, and then Jesus himself, appeared and said “Do not be afraid.”

The women who went to the tomb went to mourn—to wail and express their anguish and also to care for the body of the one they loved. Jesus may have spoken about being raised back to life, and they may have witnessed Lazarus' return to life, but they knew death too well to really expect anything out of the ordinary. They had heard the taunts as Jesus hung on the cross – “If you are God's son, come down from the cross ... He saved others but he cannot save himself!” In their anguish, a bit of doubt perhaps set in: Could the taunts be true?

Ready or not, Jesus was alive and appearing to them! The women's instinctive move to take hold of his feet may have simply been an act of adoration, but I imagine that it was also a psychological response to keep him planted in their reality, grounded in the life they had previously enjoyed together. And didn't he tell them to send the disciples back to Galilee to meet him? That was the location of his ministry, maybe things would be the same!

But Jesus called his disciples to the mountain, a place of communion with God, not to the seashore, or the synagogue, or the well at the village square, where Jesus had carried out his ministry. He was alive, but in a new way. And he was calling those who had followed him to also be alive in a new way. He would be returning to God and no longer physically present. His presence would be through God's spirit. And since his presence would not be limited by space and time, he expected the community to spread out, to carry his message of “God with us” beyond Galilee and beyond the Jewish community.

But this wouldn't happen immediately. The gospel of John tells us that some of the disciples went back to their fishing nets for awhile. The book of Acts records the disciples waiting, going through a process to find a replacement for Judas, trying to keep community life as it had been. This is the normal activity of grieving, trying to hold on, as much as possible to a former life.

In our worship during the coming weeks of the Easter season we will walk with the first century community as it continued to navigate the path of fear and joy, trying to understand its new reality. And we will walk our own path of finding *our* new way, for we too have had a tragic loss. Just as Jesus called his community to live in a new way in the resurrection, he calls our community to do the same.

It might be hard to imagine, but let me offer a few glimpses of new life emerging from tragedy and death:

The first comes from our New Testament reading this morning where Peter is speaking to the household of Cornelius, a God-fearing Roman centurion. Who would have imagined that Peter, the broken man with deep remorse for having denied knowing Jesus after he was arrested, would ever wish to set foot in the household of a Roman centurion. It was the centurions who meted out Jesus' sentence and nailed him to the cross. Yet, in the resurrection, Peter opened himself to receive a vision from God—the dream of a veritable feast of unclean, non-kosher foods that God told him to eat. Peter rightly interpreted this to mean that God was calling him to extend the boundary of his community to include non-Jewish believers. Peter truly became the “fisher of people,” in a kingdom open to all, that Jesus had called him to at the beginning of his ministry. The resurrection is also for the living.

A year and a half ago, when my brother and his wife tragically died, my niece and nephew, just 24 and 21, were thrust into the daily operation and management of their father's ranch. My niece had never been especially fond of the ranch: she was an early vegetarian and this was a place where animals were raised for slaughter; it was also the home of her step-mother with whom she didn't share a lot in common. As a child and early adolescent she would bring books to the ranch and sit and read while others did the chores. So although she was older, she needed to defer to her younger brother who had the experience, the know-how, and a love for the bison operation.

There was inevitably conflict between them from time to time, but in their struggle for survival they forged a new relationship as close friends. The city girl, who dreamed of living in a tree house and found safety in wooded areas, has slowly come to understand and appreciate the beauty her father had seen in the open prairie landscape. She is now living alone on the ranch since her brother has returned to the university, cooking in her step-mother's kitchen, feeding the animals and bravely gathering eggs from indignant old hens, and not fearing the sounds of the night. Resurrection is also for the living.

And my friend who lost her husband: before he became ill, she had begun training in spiritual direction. A trained counselor with years of experience doing family therapy, she desired to more fully integrate her faith and spirituality in her work. After her husband's death, her focus began to change and she transferred to a M.Div. program, still thinking of lay ministry. But friends and professors prodded her to be open to another call and soon she will be ordained as a minister of word and sacrament in the Lutheran Church. Five years after her husband's

death, she is embarking on a new journey and knows the words of her friend to be true: “Resurrection is also for the living.”

As Christians, death is not what we fear, for in our baptism we begin the process, turning away and dying, as it were, from the powers of evil, domination, and greed, and entering the life of the Spirit which bridges this world and the next. We know that Christ will be with us in death even as in life. But what is hard for us, is parting with those whom we love, giving up dreams and expectations for life in the way we had expected, and trusting God to bring us through the grief and insecurity into a new and different life.

It *will* happen. As surely as the seemingly dead bulbs we planted in this soil on the day of Mike’s memorial service are springing into green, our shriveled spirits will grow and blossom. Jesus’ fearful little band of a hundred or so – just about our very size – huddled in a locked room after he died, went on to create a church that has reached around the world and lasted some 2000 years. It has had numerous deaths and resurrections yet it continues and we have been called into its ever-changing life.

We are in good company, with the women at the tomb and the disciples on the mountain in Galilee, when we feel caught between fear and joy, worship and doubt. In the hard moments and days ahead let us remember, (and say it with me, please) “Resurrection is also for the living.”

Joetta Schlabach